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Precision and Reticence: *Eudora Welty's Poetic Vision*

WILLIAM JAY SMITH

Isak Dinesen, in introducing herself, used to say that she came from a long line of storytellers. Eudora Welty comes from a similar long line, and her work reminds us on every page of the qualities of the ancient art of storytelling, which are often lost sight of today. The ancient storyteller was a poet, and to hold the attention of his listeners he made use of those age-old rhythmic and incantatory devices that we still find in folktales. The action of his story might be endlessly complicated, but he had to make every bit of it immediately clear and memorable. His tale was often lyrical, and at moments of great tension it would break into pure song. All the senses were brought into play so that the listener could literally see the action as it unfolded, smell the evil villain, and touch the soft wings of birds that lifted him from the earth. In a moving passage to which I shall return, Eudora Welty in *The Optimist's Daughter* evokes the storyteller's voice when she describes the protagonist remembering the sound of her parents reading to each other:

When Laurel was a child, in this room and in this bed where she lay now, she closed her eyes like this and the rhythmic, nighttime sound of the two beloved reading voices came rising in turn up the stairs every night to reach her. She could hardly fall asleep, she tried to keep awake, for pleasure. She cared for her own books, but she cared more for theirs, which meant their voices. In the lateness of the night, their two voices reading to each other where she could hear them, never letting a silence divide or interrupt them, combined into one unceasing voice and wrapped her around as she listened, as still as if she were asleep. She was sent to sleep under a velvety cloak of words, richly patterned and stitched with gold, straight out of a fairy tale, while they went reading on into her dreams.

As Katherine Anne Porter long ago remarked, Eudora Welty has "an ear sharp, shrewd, and true as a tuning fork." She has such control of the speech that she records that like the true poet she makes her reader read with exactly the rhythm that she chooses, a rhythm that may range all the way from the lickety-split monologue of the heroine of "Why I Live at the P. O.":

I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking "Pose Yourself" photos, and Stella-Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am and for that reason she's spoiled.

to the somber, terrifying down-beat in the concluding words of the murderer in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?"

Once, I run away from my home. And there was a ad for me, come to be printed in our county weekly. My mother paid for it. It was from her. It says: "Son: you are not being hunted for anything but to find you." That time, I come on back home.

But people are dead now.

And it's so hot. Without it even being August yet.

Anyways, I seen him fall. I was evermore the one.

So I reach me down my old guitar off the nail in the wall. 'Cause I've got my guitar, what I've held onto from way back when, and I never dropped that, never lost or forgot it, never hocked it but to get it again, never give it away, and I set in my chair, with nobody home but me, and I start to play, and sing a-down. And sing a-down, down, down. Sing a-down, down, down, down. Down.

We could all make an anthology of the voices from Miss Welty's writing. Once we have heard them, they remain with us for a lifetime. But I wish to call attention not to the obvious surface aural appeal of the stories, but rather to the deeper metaphor-making genius that places Eudora Welty in the oldest tradition of the poet-storyteller.

In China in the eleventh century Wei T'ai put down the following observation: "Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing the feeling shows in the words; this is how poetry enters deeply into us." Let us examine this precision and reticence and their poetical effect in the work of Eudora Welty, first in a small piece, a poem printed twenty years ago in *The New Yorker* (XXXIII, No. 5, 35). Miss Welty had not intended this for publication, but had sent it in a letter to her friend

Howard Moss, the poetry editor, who felt that its charm demanded a public, as well as a private, audience:

A Flock of Guinea Hens Seen from a Car

The lute and the pear are your half sisters,
The mackerel moon a full first cousin,
And you were born to appear seemly, even when running on
 guinea legs
As maiden-formed, as single-minded as raindrops,
Ellipses, small homebodies of great orbits (little knots at the back
 like apron strings),
Perfected, sealed off, engraved like a dozen perfect consciences,
As egglike as the eggs you know best, triumphantly speckled . . .
But fast!
Side-eyed with emancipation, no more lost than a string of pearls
 are lost from one another,
You cross the road in the teeth of Pontiacs
As over a threshold, into waving, gregarious grasses,
Welcome wherever you go — the Guinea Sisters.

Bobbins with the threads of innumerable visits behind you,
As light on your feet
As the daughters of Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street,
Do you ever wonder where Africa has fled?
Is the strangeness of your origins packed tight in those little nutmeg
 heads, so ceremonious, partly naked?
Is there time to ask each other what became of the family wings?
Do you dream?
Princess of Dapple,
Princess of Moonlight,
Princess of Conch,
Princess of Guinealand,
Though you roost in the care of S. Thomas Truly, Rt. 1
(There went his mailbox flying by),
The whole world knows you've never yet given up the secret of
 where you've hidden your nests.

This piece possesses in miniature, as in a locket almost, all the qualities found in Eudora Welty's entire work — its spontaneity, its exuberance, its triumphant comic spirit, its careful characterization, its lilt, its reverence, its underlying wonder and mystery. I am reminded here of what Paul Valéry once said of Colette. While others have to

work at writing, said Valéry, to Colette it comes naturally. And so it seems to come to Eudora Welty, so different from Colette and yet so close to her in spirit. From both of them the observed world flows as from a fountain; there is never the slightest hint of the pump. This little poem is a throw-away number, tossed off, seemingly thrown right out the window of the car in which it was written; and yet it tells us what a wonderful universe we inhabit where such strange, exotic, and beautiful creatures can roost right next door — in the care of yours, Thomas Truly. Certainly Eudora Welty is in this instance precise about the thing so that we have before us, done with perfect brush strokes, the picture of a flock of guinea hens running across the road, and she is just as reticent about the feeling; indeed, the thing observed is reticence itself:

The whole world knows you've never yet given up the secret of
where you've hidden your nests.

Just as the guinea hens do not reveal the hiding place of their nests so the feeling here is held back and made all the stronger by being put wholly into the thing observed. This is a wonderful bit of fluff, of light verse, and yet it is at the same time serious, as all light verse must be. (All writing, as Miss Welty frequently reminds us, is serious if it is any good.) What a magnificent use of apostrophe and anticlimax, of metaphor and simile, and, of course, of personification, the human reference, which gives depth and dimension and resonance:

Ellipses, small homebodies of great orbits (little knots at the back
like apron strings),
Perfected, sealed off, engraved like a dozen perfect consciences,
.....
You cross the road in the teeth of Pontiacs
As over a threshold, into waving, gregarious grasses,
Welcome wherever you go — the Guinea Sisters.

In speaking of the guinea hens as sisters, Miss Welty — perhaps instinctively, for nothing in this verse seems at all studied — evokes an ancient tradition. The Greeks spoke of guinea fowl as “*Meleagridae*,” because it was thought that Meleager’s sisters had been transformed into guinea hens.

I am not the first to call attention to Eudora Welty’s awareness of the visual and plastic arts. In connection with her miniature of guinea hens, I think of what she once wrote about the Spanish sculptor José de Creft, whose *taille directe*, his method of working directly in stone, she admires. She commented, as she observed him at work: “He also

occupied himself with a whole colony of two- and three-inch high clay figures which he brought with him. A marvelous and sympathetic sense of the absurd in man could account for the playful but astonishing and keen distortions in these figures, which are a kind of thinking in clay. A godlike affection as well as a devastating devil-glance has perpetrated these. Caricature can be the sign of the whole of tolerance — and limitless delight in the unending possibilities of form. And the absurd is often the last gate before the most unexplored fields of the imagination — where any undreamed of beauty might be. . . . All of life has its place in de Crefft's frame of vision — life as of-the-moment, as a smile, yet enduring as stone is. A truth is shown here — that the most intimate, fragile, transitory expression of life is as real and enduring as basic rock — that nothing in life can be lost — the most playful moments, equally with the most serious, endure and have their place." All of life has its place in Eudora Welty's frame of vision also, and nowhere is this more evident than in *The Optimist's Daughter*, where the frame of vision encompasses vision itself. The thing seen is sight.

In his fine essay "Speech and Silence" James Boatwright says: "Most novels of course *contain* speech and silence, but *Losing Battles* seems to me a special case, in that it is not only an overwhelming *gathering* of voices — dozens of them — shouting, whispering, intoning and preaching thousands of words, thousands of sentences, among them some of the funniest, saddest, hardest and most truthful we are likely to hear anywhere — *Losing Battles* not only *is* the voices, and the silences that sometimes lie between them, ticking like time bombs: it is also *about* speech and silence, about these profoundly curious phenomena. In its unfolding, the novel suggests to us, for the most part obliquely, dramatically, *what to make of* speech and silence." In a similar way, *The Optimist's Daughter* is about not only all the many things both sad and funny that are seen through the eyes of the protagonist, but also about the eye itself, its function and ultimately its artistic triumph. Mr. Boatwright calls attention to the scene in *Losing Battles* when night has fallen and the family has gathered on the porch in the glare of a dangling light bulb: "For the first time, all talk was cut off, and no baby offered to cry. Silence came travelling in on solid, man-made light." In *The Optimist's Daughter* we also hear the many voices of the great human family, and perceive the same great silence, but we are aware especially of light, both natural and man-made, as the central focus of the work.

In *The Optimist's Daughter* Judge McKelva has come to New Orleans from his home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, to consult a well-known eye specialist, originally a neighbor whom he had befriended

and helped through medical school, to have his eyes examined. It is early March, the time of Mardi Gras. Judge McKelva is accompanied by his silly second wife, Fay, whom he had met when she was a member of a typists' pool at a bar convention, and his daughter, Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow in her middle forties, slightly older than Fay. Laurel, whose husband had been killed by Kamikaze pilots in World War II, has come from Chicago, where she makes her living as a designer of fabrics (her most recent job has been designing a curtain for a repertory company). Judge McKelva's trouble is diagnosed immediately as a detached retina, and he is operated on at once. The two women watch over him during the succeeding days in the dark hospital room. Just as his eye is about to heal, the Judge suddenly dies, his death brought on by Fay, who in exasperation shakes him and tries to get him up. The two women accompany the body back to Mount Salus, where it is laid out in the family library to be viewed by the townspeople, and by members of Fay's family, who have driven over from Texas. Judge McKelva is buried not in the old section of the town cemetery next to his first wife, but in the new section near the interstate in a plot chosen by Fay. While Fay departs with her family for a few days, Laurel, alone in the house, struggles to come to terms with the deaths of her parents and of her husband. Just before she leaves the house, she happens in a kitchen closet on her mother's breadboard, which had been carved by her husband. She finds it marred by the gouges that Fay has made by cracking walnuts on it. She lifts the breadboard to strike Fay, who appears, but then stops, realizing that Fay is like a child, incapable of understanding anything that has happened to her. Laurel leaves for Chicago, free of the burden of the past but at the same time restored by having discovered the "whole story, the whole solid past." Memory for her then "lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can be empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams."

The book is divided into four parts like the four panels of an altarpiece. The first is the hospital with its concentration on the inner vision, on the eye itself; the second is the return to Mount Salus, the outer vision, the eye's view of the funeral; the third, the protagonist's dark night, the focus within the house and within the self; and finally the outer and inner meeting, with the protagonist's confrontation of her stepmother and the final resolution, the development in the protagonist of a deep inner vision and of real insight.

All the dictionary meanings of the word "eye" and their symbolic implications have full play from the very first paragraph when the nurse shows the Judge, together with his wife and daughter, into the

windowless room for the optical examination, holding in his hand the glasses that he customarily wears on a ribbon. The overlying levels of verbal play are so complex and constitute such a luminous unity that they reveal themselves only after several readings. Judge McKelva's trouble begins when on his porch he looks out at the fig tree in his yard, and finds that the homemade reflectors, the rounds of tin, placed on the tree to frighten off the birds, are giving off flashes. These homemade reflectors become the outer reflection of the retina detached from the eyeball and swinging in dislocation. After the Judge's death our attention is called once again to the bird-frighteners:

As Laurel walked with Miss Adele toward her own opening in the hedge, there could be heard a softer sound than the singing from the dogwood tree. It was rhythmic but faint, as from the shaking of a tambourine.

"Little mischiefs! Will you look at them showing off," said Miss Adele.

A cardinal took his dipping flight into the fig tree and brushed wings with a bird-frightener, and it crashed faintly. Another cardinal followed, then a small band of them. Those thin shimmering discs were polished, rain-bright, and the redbirds, all rival cocks, were flying at their tantalizing reflections. At the tiny crash the birds would cut a figure in the air and tilt in again, then again.

"Oh, it's a game, isn't it, nothing but a game!" Miss Adele said, stepping gracefully into her own backyard.

But for Laurel this is more than a game; it is a grim reminder of the blood in her father's eyeball and of the Japanese Kamikaze pilots who came down to kill her husband in World War II. The detached retina is again reflected in the double baskets which Laurel cups together to enclose the chimney swift that has flown down the chimney of the house, looking when it is finally caught "eyeless, unborn, so still was it holding."

The Optimist's Daughter contains some of Eudora Welty's most brilliant descriptive writing, but none of it is merely for decoration; all of it has an important part in moving the story forward. Here is the Judge's room at the hospital:

This was like a nowhere. Even what could be seen from the high window might have been the rooftops of any city, colorless and tarpatched, with here and there small mirrors of rainwater. At first, she did not realize she could see the bridge—it stood out there dull in the distance, its function hardly evident, as if it were only

another building. The river was not visible. She lowered the blind against the wide white sky that reflected it. It seemed to her that the grayed-down, anonymous room might be some reflection itself of Judge McKelva's "disturbance," his dislocated vision that had brought him here.

Laurel rushes into the room when her father is dying:

The door stood wide open, and inside the room's darkness a watery constellation hung, throbbing and near. She was looking straight out at the whole Mississippi River Bridge in lights. She found her way, the night light burning.

The Venetian blind has fallen, and as she gazes out, she in reality gazes into the eyeball of her father, whose life is ebbing away. As the train pulls out of New Orleans on to Lake Pontchartrain, Laurel finds her own reflection in the windowpane:

Set deep in the swamp, where the black trees were welling with buds like red drops, was one low beech that had kept its last year's leaves, and it appeared to Laurel to travel along with their train, gliding at a magic speed through the cypresses they left behind. It was her own reflection in the windowpane — the beech tree was her head. Now it was gone. As the train left the black swamp and pulled out into the space of Pontchartrain, the window filled with a featureless sky over pale smooth water, where a seagull was hanging with wings fixed like a stopped clock on a wall.

Laurel moves down the hospital hall like Alice down the rabbit hole:

A strange milky radiance shone in a hospital corridor at night, like moonlight on some deserted street. The whitened floor, the whitened walls and ceiling, were set with narrow bands of black receding into the distance, along which the spaced-out doors, graduated from large to small, were all closed. Laurel had never noticed the design in the tiling before, like some clue she would need to follow to get to the right place. But of course the last door on the right of the corridor, the one standing partway open as usual, was still her father's.

Laurel has indeed all the Alice qualities — a love of decorum, a hatred of noise — in contrast to Fay, the evil stepmother, whose birthday is the day of Mardi Gras, who loves noise and the sounds "of hundreds, of thousands, of people *blundering*," and who chooses a graveyard plot for her husband on the edge of the interstate highway. While Alice

offers us a clear display of reason in an underground nightmare world, Laurel threads a path through an everyday world of nightmare, where in the words of Goya, echoing Addison, "When reason slumbers, monsters are created." It is only at the end of the book, having developed insight and inner vision, that she can put these monsters in their proper place.

Within the central metaphor of vision, words play an important role. For Fay, who never calls anything by name and whose family she says is no longer living, words are dead things. For her writing is type-writing. But for Laurel words, in the slow development of insight, are crucial. While in the external scenes, words whirl busily and noisily around from person to person within "the great, interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them," in the scenes in which the concentration is interior, words are silent; they are literally seen, not heard. Laurel reads to her father in the afternoon in the hospital:

Nicholas Nickleby had seemed as endless to her as time must seem to him, and it had now been arranged between them, without words, that she was to sit there beside him and read — but silently, to herself. He too was completely silent while she read. Without being able to see her as she sat by his side, he seemed to know when she turned each page, as though he kept up, through the succession of pages, with time, checking off moment after moment; and she felt it would be heartless to close her book until she'd read him to sleep.

In the library behind the bank of greenery where Judge McKelva is laid out, Laurel sees the two loaded bookcases "like a pair of old, patched velvety cloaks hung up there on the wall." When her eye locates the set of Gibbon the color of ashes "like a sagging sash across the shelf," she realizes that she should have read Gibbon rather than Dickens to her father. The books in the library, shoulder to shoulder, "had long since made their own family." In every book she is reminded of the voices of her father and mother reading to each other, of "the breath of life flowing between them, and the words of the moment riding on it that held them in delight." In her mother's desk Laurel comes on McGuffey's Fifth Reader, from which her mother, when blind in bed, would recite the compulsive rhythms of "The Cataract of Lodore":

... *Rising and leaping —*
Sinking and creeping,

*Swelling and sweeping —
Showering and springing,
Flying and flinging,
Writhing and ringing . . .*

The words recited from memory by her mother were a kind of defense “in some trial that seemed to be going on against her life.” Now seen on the page, they rush up to Laurel illuminating the memory of her mother’s last blind days. When at the end of the book Laurel stands in the driveway burning her father’s letters and her mother’s papers, she sees on one little scrap the words “this morning?” with “the uncompromising hook of her mother’s question mark.” As the words are consumed in smoke, she wants to reach for them as a child might for a coin left lying in the street, wanting only to replace the words and make them over, giving her mother new words for the vanishing ones.

Laurel’s final confrontation of words brings home to us the true meaning of vision, with which the novel has been concerned. In the beginning Laurel is a designer of fabrics, attentive only to external reality, avoiding involvement with other people. She had been designing a theater curtain when she left Chicago. Now with the insight that she has gained into the nature of love and memory, she can part that curtain and look at what she sees in the breadboard fashioned by her dead husband, “the whole story, the whole solid past.” Her husband Philip Hand (the names of all the characters are significant) was a craftsman, and now in the fullness of memory Laurel is truly married to her craft. While early in the book she sees her head reflected in the windowpane of the train as a beach tree with last year’s leaves, she departs in the end from her home town in the simple glory of her name — Laurel, green and growing — waved to by the schoolchildren, unknown to her but saluting the true artist that she has become.

Place is honored here as in all Miss Welty’s work: there are masterly descriptions of the meeting of water and sky, earth and air, and of the birds that bring them together. Birds move constantly in and out, and their symbolic importance emerges at key moments in the story. Pigeons come to Laurel’s mind when she remembers her childhood vacations “up home” in West Virginia with her mother and grandmother:

Laurel had kept the pigeons under eye in their pigeon house and had already seen a pair of them sticking their beaks down each other’s throats, gagging each other, eating out of each other’s craws, swallowing down all over again what had been swallowed before: they were taking turns. The first time, she hoped they might

never do it again, but they did it again next day while the other pigeons copied them. They convinced her that they could not escape each other and could not themselves be escaped from. So when the pigeons flew down, she tried to position herself behind her grandmother's skirt, which was long and black, but her grandmother said again, "They're just hungry, like we are."

On the train on the way down to be married in New Orleans, Laurel and Philip gaze out on the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi:

They were looking down from a great elevation and all they saw was at the point of coming together, the bare trees marching in from the horizon, the rivers moving into one, and as he touched her arm she looked up with him and saw the long, ragged, pencil-faint line of birds within the crystal of the zenith, flying in a V of their own, following the same course down. All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world.

And they themselves were a part of the confluence.

And finally, driving death from the house, Laurel releases the chimney swift:

Something struck her face — not feathers; it was just a blow of wind. The bird was away. In the air it was nothing but a pair of wings — she saw no body any more, no tail, just a tilting crescent being drawn back into the sky.

Like the soul leaving the body, the bird becomes a brush stroke on the air, merging with light itself.

In my glancing metaphorical summary I have not discussed the most important element of the book, the characters. They are among the funniest, most moving, and at times most terrifying that Miss Welty has yet created, and, as is fitting in a work concerned with vision, are presented in distinct and powerful tableaux. If in painterly terms the hospital scenes of *The Optimist's Daughter* evoke the handling of light by Georges Latour or Vermeer, the funeral scenes call up in their combined humor and horror both Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch.

What I have been attempting to say Miss Welty has summarized herself in her foreword to *One Time, One Place*, the album of her photographs published not long after *The Optimist's Daughter* first appeared in *The New Yorker*:

We come to terms as well as we can with our lifelong exposure to the world, and we use whatever devices we may need to survive.

But eventually, of course, our knowledge depends upon the living relationship between what we see going on and ourselves. If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn't happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly and from nowhere but within. The sharpest recognition is surely that which is charged with sympathy as well as with shock — it is a form of human vision. And that is of course a gift. We struggle through any pain or darkness in nothing but the hope that we may receive it, and through any term of work in the prayer to keep it.

In Eudora Welty's story "A Memory" a young girl who has been studying painting lies beside a lake making frames with her hands. The human scene that she discovers is not the one that she had hoped for or expected, but she is able in memory to put it down thoughtfully and clearly. The protagonist of *The Optimist's Daughter* appears to be that young girl now grown to maturity, and in the end her frame of vision can take in not only things but the infinitely extended shadows of things; she can concern herself profoundly with vision itself. *The Optimist's Daughter* may well be the most personal of Eudora Welty's works, but she has kept her eye precisely on her subject, and there is not the slightest hint of self-pity or self-glorification. And yet by being reticent about her feeling, she allows the reader's mind to respond fully to the subject. The novel is a narrative and lyrical masterpiece in which every detail is exact and significant. "Attention to detail," Osip Mandelstam said, "is the virtue of the lyric poet. Carelessness and sloppiness are the devices of lyrical sloth." Eudora Welty like the ancient lyric poet-storyteller has woven a multi-layered fabric of words, words concerned with the simplest but most important things that we know — life, death, love, and memory — and in so doing has enriched our language and given us in *The Optimist's Daughter* one of the true glories of modern literature.